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SUBJECT: VUKOVAR HIGH SCHOOLS END NINE YEARS OF ETHNIC DIVISION

¶1. Demonstrating that ethnic reconciliation is slowly but surely taking place even in regions most severely affected by the conflict of the early 1990s, high schools in Vukovar this year ended the practice of educating ethnic Serb and Croatian students in separate schools. Ethnic Serb students will still receive education with the Cyrillic alphabet and in their "own" language, as is their right under the law, but classes will take place in the same buildings and the students will mix freely outside the classroom. This is an encouraging sign, particularly in Vukovar where the scars of the 1991 siege are still visible and reconciliation is likely to take many years.

¶2. The principal of one secondary school in Vukovar told the Embassy that the ethnic Serb community was able to overcome some opposition by the conservative city government to the idea of teaching both Serb and Croatian students in the same school. The principal was pleased by the prospect of preserving the minority right to classes in the minority language while bringing the students closer together at school. He credited the OSCE Mission with facilitating the change. The OSCE Mission's political officer acknowledged the right to separate education by law, but called the Vukovar move a step in the right direction. He also commended the Ministry of Education for efforts to diminish possible tensions before the school year began. The Ministry has worked closely with the OSCE Mission on the "Children Together" project, designed to increase interaction between children of Serb and Croat ethnicity through art, literature and sports contests among children in 30 ethnically mixed primary schools.

¶3. The NGO community was equally pleased by the move. Vesna Terselic, a leading human rights activist and president of the Peace Studies Center, welcomed the possibility for children of different ethnicities to interact. "The situation in Vukovar is special. We need to understand those who wanted separate schools too, but this increases a number of options and is therefore a positive step." The director of the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights in Osijek, Branka Kaselj, said she thought it was high time to introduce the measure, but noted that both children and teachers will continue to need support to avert possible misunderstandings.

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